

The absent presence: children's place in narratives of human trafficking

Abstract

This article uses in-depth qualitative data, obtained as part of research examining human trafficking from Slovakia to the United Kingdom, to explore the place of children in human trafficking processes. Rather than foregrounding cases of children as direct subjects of abuse, the article focuses on instances where children are used to control, manipulate and exploit relatives embroiled in human trafficking. We study examples when children are moved across national borders and those when they remain in the home country, and show how in both accounts their (absent) presence constitutes a significant means for facilitating, maintaining and intensifying the exploitation of their adult relatives. Through doing so, the article demonstrates how identifying the distinct spaces and moments within which children appear in narratives of exploitation has the potential to uncover nefarious practices occurring within the human trafficking process, as well as the indirect effects of human trafficking on family dynamics. The article extends conceptual understandings of agency in human trafficking by illustrating how children are simultaneously subjects of exploitation and emplaced through complex channels within the exploitation of others.

Key Words: Agency; Children; Eastern Europe; Exploitation; Human Trafficking; Qualitative

Introduction

Human trafficking has become a significant issue in legal and policy debates on contemporary forms of exploitation and human rights abuses (O'Connell Davidson, 2016; Howard, 2017). Children are often a focal point in these discussions, as well as in related critical scholarship regarding the conceptualisation of human trafficking within legal frameworks (Hynes, 2015; O'Connell Davidson, 2011), sociological studies (Boyden and Howard, 2013; O'Connell Davidson, 2013), and popular and/or media representations (Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016; Hill, 2016). This literature is often situated within a wider intellectual movement seeking to (re)theorise relations between borders, human agency and state apparatus. It does so by problematizing the framing of migrants as objects or victims of migration regimes, and instead adopting migrant subjectivities as the starting point for analysis (see for example Esson, 2015a; Huijsmans and Baker, 2012). This article contributes to this scholarship by exploring the place of children in the narratives presented by adults trafficked between Slovakia and the United Kingdom. Through a series of snapshots, we seek to tease out the multitude of relationships and practices through which children's encounters with human trafficking processes emerge, moving away from the exclusive focus on children as "direct victims" of human trafficking.

Our main argument is that children's presence in human trafficking can be significant even if they are not direct subjects of exploitation. Their (absent) presence facilitates both the exploitative practices of human trafficking and the resisting and recuperating agency of trafficked adults. We illustrate these points empirically through interviews with adults who experienced human trafficking between Slovakia and the UK between 2012 and 2015, and subsequently entered a national support programme in

Slovakia (see AUTHORS, DATE for more details). Slovakia has recently emerged as a major source country of human trafficking to the UK over the last few years, yet only a minority of cases referred to authorities are minors (NCA, 2015, 2016), and in practice, only very few cases of human trafficking involving minors have been prosecuted. Of 45 persons who entered the national support programme in Slovakia after experiencing trafficking in the UK, only one was younger than 18. Our article therefore explores the relations between the relative absence of children in the human trafficking files and their presence in trafficking narratives.

Research on human trafficking often evolves from collaboration with a Partner Organisation (PO) to gain access to participants (Tyldum, 210). This was the case in our study, where contact with participants was facilitated by a PO with a long history of post-trafficking support provision in Slovakia. We received full ethical clearance in accordance with social research norms, including voluntary participation and the right to opt-in, confidentiality and anonymity, before beginning the fieldwork. All interviews were undertaken in Slovak by the first author but a case worker from the PO acted as a chaperone in some instances.

The next section of the article provides a concise overview of recent scholarship on children in the context of human trafficking and exploitation and further clarifies how this paper extends this scholarship. The remainder of the article is then dedicated to our empirical discussion. We conclude by illustrating how intertwining a more relational perspective on children's agency with understandings of human trafficking processes can help transgress the perpetrator/victim dichotomy and decentre the notion of agency beyond such binary links.

Placing children in human trafficking

The UN Protocol to “Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children”, as the common reference point for definitional purposes of human trafficking, emphasises the place of children in human trafficking processes. It is therefore perhaps understandable if narratives of human trafficking emphasise violence against children and unfold from the urgency to combat it. However, portraying children solely as victims of exploitative practices and in need of protection constitutes a denial of their agency (O'Connell Davidson, 2011). As development scholars in particular point out, discourses of human trafficking are based on “norms pertaining to the social, cultural, economic and historic context of the West [that] have been extrapolated to form the basis of the international child rights regime” (Howard, 2014, p.557). Universalist conceptions of “children in need” do not necessarily acknowledge the local and situated contexts of children’s lives. For instance, equating children’s mobility and activities that are unsupervised or supervised outside the scope of family and the State automatically with child exploitation overlooks the diversity of “historical and economic-moral” (Boyden and Howard, p.365), familial (Beazley, 2015) and peer (Heissler, 2013) relations in which children’s experiences evolve and in which children emerge as actors interlinked and interdependent with others. Even the policies intended to protect children from human trafficking might have both protective and punitive effects and rather than simply imposing supervisory measures on children and their social networks, they trigger active responses in the form of resistance and reworking of regulatory regimes (Aufseeser, 2014). Understanding children’s place in human trafficking thus requires thinking beyond the perpetrator/victim couplet. This endeavour requires sensitivity given that while there are children throughout the world being subjected to

exploitation linked to human trafficking, children are more than passive subjects of violence. They can do shape their own lives and the lives of others.

Additionally, portrayals of children as victims of human trafficking play a performative role in which particular children are displaced and replaced by a symbolic notion of childhood (O'Connell Davidson, 2013). The functions of childhood as “a universalising, affective condition” (Kraftl, 2008, p.82), a vehicle of sympathy conditioned upon age (Hörschelmann, 2015) or a spectacle – “a site of accumulation, commodification and desire – in whose name much is done” (Katz, 2008, p.5) have been widely recognised and discussed in the geographical literature. These arguments, suggesting a shift in political discourses and practices from children’s experiences to the instrumental deployment of the *idea of childhood*, relate also to the debates about human trafficking. Yea’s research illustrates this through a number of examples, including how the visual *images* of a “third world girl” as a “muted” victim is put on display in an affective political campaign intended to generate sympathy and support to anti-trafficking campaigns among the privileged adult audience (Yea, 2015). Elsewhere, Yea presents how local anti-trafficking initiatives become enacted through interventions of global campaigners operating with dislocated representations of the child trafficking victim (Yea, 2013).

Without trivialising the violence experienced by children entangled in the exploitative web of human trafficking processes, this paper seeks to avoid a presumptive approach to children as a priori directly victimised by human trafficking and to develop a critical inter-related perspective of what other positions children assume in human trafficking processes. This is in order to interrogate more critically the relationships and practices between traffickers, trafficked persons and social

networks, including; family, community and formal institutions. We make this feasible by thinking through the following questions; how does children's presence impact on human trafficking processes? And how are children affected by human trafficking beyond direct victimisation? The conceptual reframing required to answer these questions offers scope to avoid universalist deployments of the idea of childhood in human trafficking discourses, and instead focus on localised and situated realities evolving from human trafficking processes as they are experienced by children but also adults. Accordingly, opportunities emerge to highlight the relational notion of social agency across the variety of actors, some of whom are rarely put in the spotlight of human trafficking analyses.

In the rest of the paper, we explore nine narratives of people who were trafficked to the UK and subsequently returned to Slovakia. These accounts were collected as part of a wider set of twenty-four interviews with a range of actors in Slovakia and the UK, including trafficked persons, support organisations in Slovakia and the UK, community workers in Slovakia and criminal justice agencies. Although all interview participants were adults, a thematic analysis of data revealed that each account contained substantive references to children as part of the human trafficking experience. Our analysis of these references resulted in four themes of children's (absent) presence – children as motivation, children as leverage, children and post-human trafficking trauma, traffickers' children - highlighting some of the variety of relationships that constitute human trafficking (of adults).

The absent presence: children's "other" places in human trafficking

Children as motivation

“I wanted to get married, to have better life, you know, for children.”

(Ms Z, Female participant in her 30's)

For Slovaks trafficked to the UK and participating in our research, the predominant reason to move abroad was to alleviate their impoverished condition, pay off a debt or address other forms of economic hardship. For a majority, the additional reason to take the risk in moving to a country of which they have little knowledge and with no language abilities were care obligations for children and occasionally other family members. For Ms Z, who was lured to the UK with the prospect of marriage to a non-EU citizen for financial reward, her objective “to have better life” intrinsically meant a better life for her children who stayed in Slovakia with her family.

This theme goes beyond the recognition that traffickers manipulate a desire amongst economically vulnerable people to improve their life chances (Esson 2015b; Limoncelli, 2011). Rather, our participants suggested that adults in economically precarious positions with young children were *specifically* targeted by traffickers. In some cases, including Ms Z's, the traffickers identified and approached people they knew were in urgent need of income. In addition to the motivation to provide for them materially, children could themselves become a means of economic benefits.

Although Slovak traffickers were deemed to be cautious of exploiting children directly, due to an awareness of strict and vigilant child protection policies in the UK in comparison with Slovakia, the welfare system in the UK available to Slovak citizens as European Union citizens provided an incentive and motivation for targeting individuals with young children. Mrs J, known to her traffickers before they approached her, noted how:

“When I worked [in a local business] in our town, [the traffickers] approached me, said that I could earn better money in England and additionally receive those benefits they give out there. [They knew] That I have three children [eligible for child benefits] and I lived in an old house with my father and wanted to refurbish it, it’s a very old house” (Ms J, Female participant in her 30’s)

Ms J was among the few trafficked persons who had a stable job when she was first approached, but it was known within the community that she was looking for ways to increase her income and address her housing situation. She was not approached by the traffickers solely for her economic hardship (as other people in the area would be more plausible candidates) but also because of her bond with the children and motivation to care for them and improve the living conditions and life chances. While Ms J and the traffickers knew each other, there were cases when traffickers recruited among strangers but with a clear goal and expectation to target adults with young children.

“Q: Were [the traffickers] your family or friends?

A: No, no family, [they were] strangers. They approached me at the train station and asked if I could go... their first question was how many children I had, they said I could work but I would need birth certificates, children’s passports.”

(Mr H, Male participant in his 30's)

Mr H was randomly approached at the train station in an adjacent town to where he was staying and, while the traffickers' initial question was about his ability to work abroad, the subsequent interrogation turned towards his family situation. Unlike Ms J, Mr H travelled to the UK without his children, but the traffickers were looking to claim child benefits on his behalf. The children, despite not being physically present and subject to direct abuse, consequently became central to the manipulative relationship between Mr H and his traffickers.

In a couple of cases, relationships between trafficked persons' children and their other family members became prominent in the facilitation of human trafficking. Travel and marriages with non-EU citizens of two young female participants, Ms A and Ms R, were initially arranged between their families and traffickers in Slovakia. Ms A and Ms R were both among the oldest siblings in large families living in poverty where the parents were struggling to provide even the basics for all their children. In both families, it was expected that young women should get married and move to their husband's households as soon as possible once they reached adulthood. While Ms A's and Ms R's families were oblivious to the actual intentions of the traffickers and subsequent abuse both women would endure in the UK, they pushed Ms A and Ms R to move to the UK in order to improve the economic situation of the family and the prospects of provision for their other children (and a child of Ms R).

These snapshots indicate that although children are rarely direct or primary subjects of exploitation in the trafficking flows between Slovakia and the UK, and as such they do not figure in the official trafficking statistics, they provide the central motivation for

trafficked adults, traffickers and sometimes also trafficked persons' families to initiate and engage in transactions that unwittingly culminate in exploitation. For trafficked persons, economic hardship is the biggest determinants of the move abroad and exposure to the risk, but this becomes more urgent when they have care responsibilities for children. For Slovak traffickers, the direct exploitation of children in the UK constitutes an unnecessary risk due to the perception that authorities dedicate more time and resources towards protecting children. This is perhaps why, as highlighted above, although Slovakia has emerged as a major source country for human trafficking to the UK over the last few years, only a handful of cases referred to authorities and resulting in prosecution involved children. However, exploiting parents' motivations together with a potential secondary benefit of child welfare payments makes adults with young children more appealing to human traffickers than those without children.

Children as leverage and children in the post-trafficking trauma

After being used as motivation to take up an offer of employment, a trafficked person's children might further become involved in the human trafficking process as leverage through being held captive by traffickers. This was not common because, as mentioned above, adults rarely took their children to the UK and traffickers rarely insisted on this as the presence of neglected children might have attracted the attention of social welfare institutions and prevent flexibility in the exploitation of trafficked adults. However, as the following quotation from Mrs J indicates, assuming control of children was a rare but powerful mechanism of coercion over the parents alongside direct physical violence or threat thereof.

“I was trapped, because they had my children and because I would end up on the street otherwise. The children had terrible scratches and bruises, her [the trafficker’s] children were beating mine. I could not ask for help because the authorities would take my children away automatically. Because of the children I could do nothing... Nothing, nothing, nothing, even if I could speak English... You know what the institutions in England are like – it’s enough if the child has a bruise or scratch.”

(Ms J, Female participant in her 30’s)

Ms J was separated and had no contact with her children while she was sexually exploited in another part of the town. At first, she was physically contained in a building with no opportunity to leave. Later, the traffickers’ surveillance lessened, but she was hesitant to leave the place because of fears over her children’s safety. The relationship between Ms J and her traffickers was highly manipulative. Her children were being beaten and traffickers threatened to hurt them further, but her concerns were augmented by her perceptions of the UK child protection services system. Ms J’s understanding, based on media portrayals in Slovakia and fuelled by the traffickers, was that even if she left her captivity and asked authorities for help, the injuries caused by the traffickers would be attributed to her own negligence and the children would be removed from her custody.

Existing literature on human trafficking usually highlights the experiences of trafficked people with regards to their recruitment, transportation and exploitation (Smith, 2017). However, a small body of research is emerging that seeks to understand better the experiences and after effects trafficked people face upon being removed from sites of exploitation (e.g. Richardson et al. 2009; Stanley et al.

2016). In cases where traffickers and trafficked adults came from the same community in Slovakia, the pressure over children and their use as a leverage continued in the post-trafficking stage of police investigation and re-integration. This is the case especially with single parents with little support in the community, who might become intimidated by traffickers' threats in relation to their children, even though the threats might not be of physical violence. After Ms J returned to Slovakia, she went through a long period of coping with the trafficking trauma, and while she successfully re-established herself in her home town and found a stable job and accommodation, she felt unable to tell, especially her younger children, the full story of sexual violence she experienced. In contrast, some of the traffickers who returned to live in the same town were spreading stories of Ms J working as a prostitute on her own free will in the UK, and one of the most difficult parts of her post-trafficking experience became the task of sheltering her children from these rumours and the associated humiliation she experienced.

The story of Ms J highlights the role that children often play in the aftermath of the human trafficking experience. Trafficked people who return to Slovakia receive limited social and legal support, and similarly to other contexts (Tsutsumi et al. 2008), their mental health needs are largely unaddressed. Support in Slovakia was further determined by an individual's compliance with the support programme conditions and often also by status as a victim of trafficking related to their willingness to testify against their perpetrators. Therefore, rather than being experienced as an individual trauma, human trafficking affected in numerous ways both the trafficked adults and their families. In this particular case, with no source of institutional psychological support, Ms J accentuated the aspect of shame

associated with her children finding out about her experience, as well as the possible damage to their own mental wellbeing (cf. Ugarte et al. 2004).

Mr L, in comparison, reflected on shame in failing his family's expectations and returning from what was supposed to be a labour journey to England without any material gains to show for his absence.

“When I arrived in Bratislava [the Slovak capital], then went to [a district town], I wanted to kiss the soil. Slovakia. Happy I was home, free, alive. But what for? My wife expected me to come with money. Family, kids, and I didn't even bring cookies for the children, nothing, all for nothing. I almost cried a river over that.”

(Mr L, male participant in his 50's)

In narratives like these, children's absence in the original trafficking story translates into an intense presence in the story of post-trafficking trauma. The reconciliation of painful past experiences with the present recuperative efforts is hampered by parents' emotional ties to their children, the need to protect children from adults' own trauma, and the overarching sense of failure in upholding caring responsibilities. Amplified especially for single parents with little additional social support networks, the emotional relationships with their children constitute both a source of agency (as a motivation to move on and re-build their lives) and a burden (as they re-experience their trauma with regards to the effects it has on the children).

Traffickers' children

The previous accounts illustrated that relationships between adults and children can be fundamental to the experience of human trafficking even if children do not experience it directly. However, it is not only relationships of trafficked adults and their children as the narratives we analysed briefly highlighted also the rather neglected issue of traffickers' own children. In Slovakia, like elsewhere (Turner and Kelly, 2009), extended family networks among traffickers are essential to the facilitation of human trafficking due to the magnitude of operation and the lack of alternative structures for organized crime. Many participants thus came in contact with wider families of their traffickers, including their children. Some participants reported how the children of traffickers were provided a good quality of life, and they brought them to articulate the contrast with their own experiences. For instance, whereas central to Ms J's story was the neglect and abuse experienced by her children, she explained how (young) children of her traffickers regularly attended school in England and actually participated in the abuse of Ms J's own children. However, other participants reported on neglect, abuse and even trafficking of traffickers' own children, including their solicitation for prostitution and arranged marriages.

“[The female trafficker] sold her daughter, they reported her and [the daughter's father] is now in jail, in England. The daughter went in care, child services took her in Slovakia. But [the trafficker] came home, took her and brought her back [to England]”

(From the narrative of Ms Z, female participant in her 30's)

Children's positions in the dynamic and complex relationships of human trafficking sometimes emerged from situational and fleeting encounters with adults involved in human trafficking both as exploiters and subjects of violence. The story of Mr H and his sister, exemplifies neglect – rather than deliberate abuse for the purpose of economic benefit – that children of their traffickers experienced.

“They had three children... We had to protect them, they did nothing for them, did not cook until my girlfriend made some soup for them at least”

(Mr H, male participant in his 30's)

This quote from Mr H, and the discussion that preceded it, illustrate well why our earlier call for more nuanced and relational understandings of agency within conceptualisation of human trafficking is needed. The agency of trafficked persons, and the ways in which this is manipulated and used by traffickers, tends to be oversimplified both in the media and at the policy level; with agency often presented as discrete individuated ‘choices’ divorced from wider structural conditions, particularly in debates over sex work and forced labour (see Anderson & Ruhs 2010; O'Connell Davidson, 2015). Yet it is apparent from the narratives above that not only should the agency of trafficked persons not be dissociated from the diverse contexts and life histories from which they emerge, but that a focus on ‘choices’ made as a

result of coercion and direct exploitation can hide far more than it reveals. It obscures the multitude of relationships and practices through which other actors, in this case children, shape and are shaped by human trafficking processes.

Conclusions

Through a series of snapshots from interviews with Slovak adults trafficked to the United Kingdom, we illustrated how children's presence facilitates the processes of human trafficking even if children are not "directly trafficked". Their presence can be significant well beyond direct exploitation, and we suggested at least four ways in which it impacts on the shape of human trafficking: through being a motivation for their carers to take the risk and engage in transactions with traffickers; through becoming a leverage for traffickers in the coercion of children's parents; through the emotional dynamics within families as trafficked adults cope with the post-trafficking trauma; and as family members of the traffickers themselves, exposed to the various dynamics of human trafficking.

Our first conclusion thus lies in pointing out that children's presence cuts across different spatialities and episodes of human trafficking, and these geographies of children's presence in human trafficking warrant further attention. Our empirical data support the critical claims that exploitation cannot be conceptualised as binary dynamics between the traffickers and the trafficked (see Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Boyden and Howard, 2013; Huijsmans and Baker, 2013). Rather, children's presence highlights the compound web of structural conditions, embodied interactions and social relationships evolving across space and time which necessitate situated responses to children's specific exposure to abuse and

exploitation. These responses might exceed the basic conceptualisation of human trafficking crime. This finding resonates with and extends debates over representation of children within narratives of human trafficking, particularly the performative role that symbolic notions of childhood play in reductive policy responses (Aufseeser, 2014; O'Connell Davidson, 2013)

Furthermore, we wish to take this conceptual recognition and draw attention to children's agency as it stands at the core of the analysis of how human trafficking unfolds. Further to recent geographical scholarship on young people's agency in the context of exploitative relations (Esson, 2015b; van Blerk, 2016), we suggest there is a need to refrain from conceptualising agency as something individually owned and instead employ a more relational perspective in which the capacity to act is derived from the particular sets of relationships one performs (Blazek, 2015). Children's presence affects the processes of human trafficking not necessarily through children's individual actions, but rather due to children's roles social relationships as they emerge across space and time. Highlighting the absent presence of children in the narratives of trafficked adults sheds light on the formation of agency among both trafficking and trafficked adults, as well as others involved in the human trafficking dynamics. Our assertion is to focus on the co-dependency in social relationships rather than individual pre-dispositions, and we reckon this focus can be extended analytically also to other actors of trafficking (and counter-trafficking) processes such as state agencies, charities, and businesses.

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